

Tom Bloxham, Opening Speech
University of Manchester WWI Commemorative Event, 25 November 2014

Ladies and gentlemen, honoured guests, a very warm welcome to our University's centenary commemoration of the First World War.

During this centenary period, and especially on days such as this, our thoughts to the human experience of war. And as we remember, we try to be conscious of what happened to men, women and children a hundred years ago.

Generations have passed since the First World War and that passage of time can often make it difficult for us to understand and appreciate the events and experiences that seem distant and remote. In the words of the novelist, L.P. Hartley, 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there'.

Our challenge today is to overcome that distance and summon up the past to think about, and remember, the people who would have been where you are, doing similar things to you, a hundred years ago.

Today is about us, and remembering our University community. It is a community that stretches back in time and encompasses staff, students and alumni from around the world. So it is absolutely right that so many of us from different parts of the University have gathered to remember the diverse experiences of our predecessors, and how so many lives were lost or changed forever, during the First World War. It is because of the many and diverse roles that our community played during the War, that we are holding our centenary commemoration on a day that is not associated with a particular event, but is a day on which we can remember everyone, in which ever way they were involved.

Some members of the University felt moved to enlist for service in armed forces and many others were conscripted for service and over 600 of them died. We'll be hearing their words during today's event and as we do, we remember them today.

Others in our community volunteered for medical or humanitarian service. Some ferried the injured from Manchester's train stations to the hospitals down Oxford Road. As we'll be hearing, others were sent to the front line and cared for those who sustained horrific injuries or worked with refugees displaced by the war. We remember them today.

As a place of research, many of the great minds in our University turned their attention to solving the great challenges posed by the war. Staff in the Sackville Street building worked on ways to increase bread production to feed the nation, others worked on ways to increase the rate at which shells could be produced. We remember them today.

In our medical school, staff worked on ways to treat those affected by shell shock and the anatomist and former Vice Chancellor, John Stopford, worked on new ways of treating gun shot wounds. Other famous names from our past, including Ernest Rutherford, worked on the beginnings of sonar technology to help keep shipping lanes open, whilst he also worked on splitting the atom. We remember them today.

Members of the University also made the courageous and difficult decision not to fight, and were sometimes misunderstood and mistreated as a result. Their efforts contributed much towards changing attitudes to conflict and began global movements for peace. We remember them today.

Then, as now, we were a diverse institution, and the war temporarily suspended our harmonious international community, as some staff and students returned to serve their home nations and others faced hostility in this country. Indeed, the first name on the University's roll of honour is Gustave De Boute, a Belgian who studied textiles. We remember them today.

Perhaps especially, we remember those that did not return to our University. When war broke out, the University had only a few thousand students, and our loss of over 600, was great. I want to tell you about three who were lost:

Henry Moseley, was a graduate of the University and became a lecturer in physics here. He had a brilliant mind and amongst other achievements discovered the systematic relation between wavelengths and atomic number – now known as Moseley's law. Moseley enlisted to serve in the army and was killed by a sniper's bullet on 10 August 1915, aged 27. Given all he had accomplished and his potential, Isaac Asimov noted that Moseley's death 'might well have been the most costly single death of the War to mankind generally.'

Another, Mark Hovell, was a student in history and before he left for war in 1916, gave the Head of history, Professor Tout, a history of the Chartist movement he had been working on. Hovell died a few months after leaving and Tout finished his work, which was posthumously published under Hovell's name in 1918.

Gertrude Powicke, was modern languages graduate and went on to teach at the Manchester High School for Girls. At the outbreak of war, she volunteered with the Quaker's Emergency and War Victims Relief Committee and spent much of the war helping those displaced by the conflict. She died in 1919 in Poland from Thyphus whilst still helping others.

As we listen to the readings and music to come, I hope you will join with me in remembering the splendid and diverse people that went before you and the devastating impact of the First World War.

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